

DIME NOVEL ROUND-UP

A monthly magazine devoted to the collecting, preservation and literature of the old-time dime and nickel novels, libraries and popular story papers.

Vol. 26 No. 1

January 15, 1958

Whole No. 304

The Rockspur Series

by J. P. Guinon



Cover of "Sport Stories" showing one of the Rockspur stories.
(From the J. P. Guinon collection)

The Rockspur Series

by J. P. Guinon

Although it was his stories of the Merriwells that made him famous, Gilbert Patten authored hundreds of other tales—western, detective, athletic, adventure, etc. Many articles have been written about him and his stories, but nearly all emphasize the Merriwells and have little to say of his other fiction. But, good as the Merriwell tales were, Patten turned out some other stuff that well deserves mention, and it is to invite attention to some of it that this is submitted.

In particular, one series of stories by Patten was so well conceived and developed that it should have received more attention from the author's fans. It was the Rockspur series, excellently written with none of the discrepancies and errors that too often marred the Merriwell narratives, a most interesting collection of related tales with unusual handling that made it outstanding. However, the most absorbing of the stories were written many years after the first ones were published, and consequently there are not many Patten followers today who have read them all. Some of them may have read one or all of the three original Rockspur titles, but there are few who know that 25 years later the tales were resumed in a fine series in

Sport Story Magazine, a Street & Smith publication.

Patten wrote the first three Rockspur stories in 1900 at the request of Street & Smith, who planned to publish them in book form. To do this, it was necessary for him to stop writing the Merriwell stories, and this job was given to John H. Whitson until such time as Patten could take over again. Whitson began with Tip Top 198 and carried on with indifferent success until No. 248 when Gil relieved him and, to the joy of thousands of Tip Toppers, resumed writing about the Merriwells. While working on the Rockspur stories Patten had supervised Whitson's production of the Merriwell adventures, outlining many of the plots, frequently writing one or more chapters of key stories, and on one occasion doing an entire story, No. 220, all by himself. Incidentally, this number of Tip Top, besides being one of the best baseball stories ever turned out by Patten, is the only one ever published with a cover showing Frank Merriwell pitching for Yale.

The Rockspur Nine, the first of this series, chronicled the fall and rise of John Smith, the tall, gangling, unaggressive and over-sensitive son of a plain, uneducated, narrow-minded

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Published Monthly at

821 Vermont Street, Lawrence, Kansas

Edited by

Edward T. LeBlanc, 87 School St., Fall River, Mass.

Entered as second-class matter at the post office at Lawrence, Kansas

Price \$2.00 per year

Assistant Editor

Ralph F. Cummings, Fisherville, Mass.

Asst. Ed. Photography—Charles Duprez, 228 Larch Lane, Smithtown, L.I., N.Y.

Ad Rates — 6c per word, \$1.00 per inch, quarter page \$2.25, half page \$3.00 and Full Page \$5.00. — 4 times for the price of three.

Ads should be submitted by the 15th of the month in order to assure publication in the following month's issue.

Maine couple. John's father eked out a living as a night watchman in Rockspur's principal industry, a woolen mill. John is a student at Rockspur Academy, and the story opens with an account of a baseball game between that school and Highland Academy, and the most hated rival of the Rockspurs. Smith loses the game for his team by his poor batting and fielding in crucial moments. As a result, he is dropped from the team and finds himself scorned by nearly every one in town, besides getting beat up by a schoolmate, Rob Linton, son of Rockspur's wealthiest citizen.

John hits the bottom that day and the disgrace affects him so deeply that his whole character undergoes a change. He determines to win back the respect of those who regard him with contempt, takes pitching and boxing lessons from a former big leaguer who works in the mill, and starts his climb, eventually becoming the star pitcher of the team and the hero of the town. The story, in spite of its hackneyed, Algerish plot, is extremely well done by Patten and the ball games are described as only Patten could do it, which means they make exceptionally good reading.

Street & Smith thought enough of the Rockspur Nine, as well as the other two original Rockspur stories, to reprint them as feature tales in early issues of their famous Popular Magazine.

In addition to John Smith, the leading characters to appear in nearly all the succeeding Rockspur stories were Dick Sterndale, the handsome, athletic, popular leader of the Rockspur Academy boys, Rob Linton, the snobbish, aristocratic son of the town's wealthiest man, Don Scott, the violent-tempered son of the village doctor, Dolph Renwood, recently arrived from Boston, the son of a very successful real estate promoter, Thad Boland, a huge, fat, lazy lump of a boy capable of amazing outbursts of energy at times, Leon Bentley, the untrustworthy, sneaky, dishonest, cigarette-smoking 1900 version of the modern juvenile delinquent, and Ag-

nes Mayfair and Dora Deland, the two principal girl characters, the first-named being John's loyal friend and sweetheart.

The next story in the series is *The Rockspur Eleven*, in which Smith plays only minor parts while Don Scott, the hot-tempered boy, is featured. Yielding to the evil influence of Leon Bentley and plagued by his bursts of rage, Don gets into plenty of trouble, but comes out all right in the end. Then follows *The Rockspur Rivals*, in which John Smith and Rob Linton are in competition in various winter sports, all in a friendly enough spirit until Leon Bentley again gets in some of his treacherous work and almost succeeds in ruining Smith while breaking up his friendship with Linton. At last, however, virtue triumphs as always (in stories, that is) and Smith gets the best of Bentley, who finds things getting too hot for him in Rockspur and leaves town, vowing to return some day and "show 'em."

Then, more than a quarter of a century later, Patten revives the Rockspur stories in a series of long novels in *The Sport Story Magazine*, beginning with the issue of May 8, 1926. The title of the first story was *The Rockspur Athletic Club*, and a unique twist was given to it and succeeding tales by bringing back most of the characters of the original Rockspur books, as mature men and women, to fill in the background while their children, in their teens, take the center of the stage. John Smith has married Agnes, who has failed to keep pace with him mentally and has become rather neurotic, querulous and jealous of her social position as wife of the owner of the woolen mills where his father once worked as a night watchman, and the wealthiest man in Rockspur. They have a son and daughter, Phil and Peggy. Phil is a rather snobbish youngster with considerable athletic ability. Don Scott, the hot-tempered hero of *The Rockspur Eleven*, has steadied down and succeeded his father as the village doctor, meanwhile contributing a son, Fred, to the

new series of stories. Rob Linton, leading character in *The Rockspur Rivals*, married and had a son, Tom, but was arrested and charged with fraud in a promotion scheme and committed suicide before his trial, leaving his wife and son in poor circumstances. Dolph Renwood, the dandy from Boston, has become a crabbed, penurious business man who is thoroughly disliked by all. Dick Sterndale has dropped out. Thad Boland has become a ne'er-do-well, and has a son, Bryant, ignorant, fat, and lazy, who is following in his father's large footsteps while Mrs. Boland washes for her neighbors to make a living for her husband and son. Leon Bentley is serving a life sentence for murder in the state penitentiary, with a wife and son to mourn him.

With the principal characters of the original *Rockspur* tales thus overhauled and shuffled as nobody but Gil Patten would have had nerve enough to do, the new series starts with a story featuring the rivalry between Phil Smith and Tom Linton, in which a fight between the two occurs and Tom knocks Smith out. It ends with both of them fast friends and with Phil pitching and Tom catching for the *Rockspur Athletic Club*. This story was followed May 22, 1926, by another novel-length tale titled *The Rockspur Battery*, in which John Smith gets into and out of some serious financial difficulties that for a while threaten to ruin him and his family's social position. This situation is used as a background for some excellent baseball stories in which Phil Smith, although badly handicapped and worried by his father's troubles, performs valiantly with Rob Linton.

On June 22, 1926, *The Rockspur Coach* was published, featuring Herbert Bentley, the son of the infamous Leon. Herbert is not like his father, but a steady, clear-thinking youngster trying to overcome the handicaps of heredity. He comes to *Rockspur* to visit an aunt and remains to participate in the activities of the young people of the town. Some fine football games are described, in which Bentley

distinguishes himself.

On October 22, 1926, *The Rockspur Spirit* appeared, in which Bentley is again featured, this time under suspicion of robbing Dolph Renwood of some money. More good football stuff is dished up by Patten. Bentley, of course, eventually succeeds in clearing himself of suspicion.

The Rockspur Outcast was the title of the next in the series on December 22, 1926. It was a highly amusing and entertaining story with a background of winter sports, featuring the metamorphosis of Bryant Boland, the fattest, most slothful boy in town, into an athlete of ability and a youth of character. Furthermore, he forces his father, the sluggish, grossly repulsive Thad, into a program of self-improvement that changes the old man amazingly.

The final tale of the series, as far as I know, was *The Rockspur Right Fielder*, a two-part story appearing April 22 and May 8, 1927, in which the regeneration of Bryant Boland and his father is completed, and Leon Bentley, dying with a lung ailment, is pardoned by the governor and comes back to *Rockspur* to die. Some excellent baseball stuff livens the story in Patten's best style.

Patten's writing in 1926 was far superior to his work along the same lines in 1900. The stories were modernized, the plots more plausible, the characters less stiff, and all resemblance to the style of Horatio Alger was gone. It is possible he intended to revive the Merriwell tales in the same manner as he did the *Rockspurs*, and indeed he did make a start in that direction with a story in *Sport Story Magazine* and a series in *Top Notch Magazine* in 1929 and 1930. But, to the great regret of his many fans, the attempt only lasted about six months.

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NEWSY NEWS

by **Ralph F. Cummings**
Fisherville, Mass.

Man's Magazine for December 1957 has a good article on "The Greatest Mystery of the Old West! Who Really killed Jesse James." By Ed Burkholder. With illustrations on the killing of Jesse James, Bob Ford, and Jesse after he had been shot.

Lou Kohrt says it's a very lonesome Christmas for him, as he lost his dear wife Nov. 27th, 1957. She had been in very poor health for some time, after going through a very serious operation last May. The good Lord prolonged her life until she died. Both she and Lou had been constantly together. Lou is missing her terribly, and we all send you our sincerest sympathy pard, and may all her sufferings be over, and that she is resting in peace, God bless her always.

Harry Jewell of Bristol, Ill., died May 2nd, 1957, so I've just heard, and I've been so busy, I haven't had a chance to look him up and see if he was a member of the H.H. Bro. Seems to me he was, but I'm not sure. His wife and daughter did everything they could for him. He died in his wife's arms. That must of been a terrible shock to her. Harry was a collector of old novels, police Gazettes and other old timers. God bless him also, where ever he may be.

There's a fine book out at 25 shillings net, called the "Chipperfields Circus." By Pamela Macgregor-Morris. It's a thrilling and highly readable story of Britain's oldest show people, well illustrated, and published by Faber & Faber, Ltd., 24 Russell Square, London, W.C. 1, England.

I received a nice card from Rev. Arthur Neetz, formerly of Emaus, Pa. Remember, he used to publish the little "All Adventure Mag." in the 1930s. He used to collect Liberty Boys of 76 and still does.

Ralph Hadley, Lowry City, Mo., wants to know if any one has any advertising, newspaper ads, or photos on the Cole Younger Circus? I'd like to get some myself, who wouldn't.

On Oct. 12th Peter Scollo and myself went up to Worcester, and I introduced him to Clyde Wakefield.

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